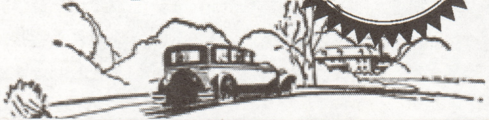
Depot Town Rag

Volume 21, Number 8

October 2008

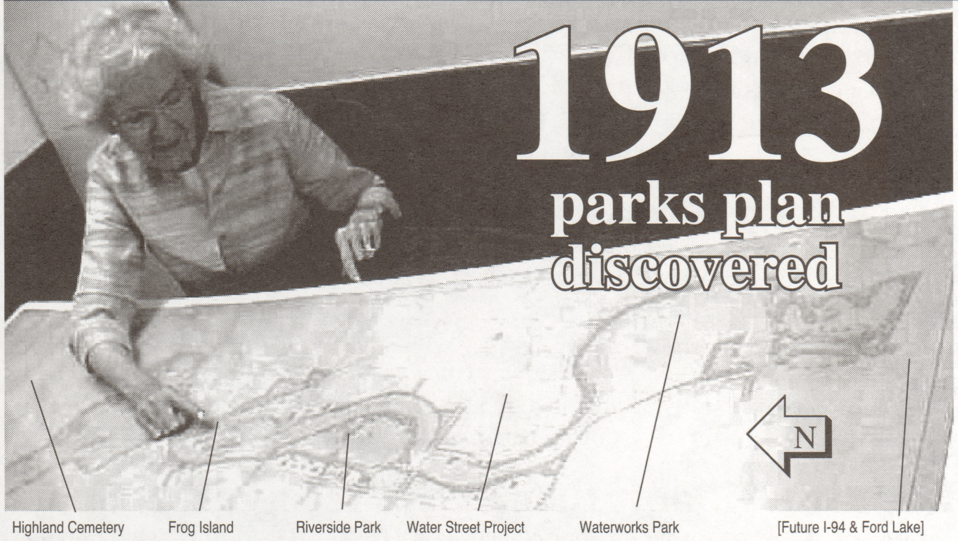
Like a walk in the park



100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

1913 parks plan discovered



Above: Nathalie Edmunds traces the route of the Huron River through Ypsilanti on the Olmsted Brothers' drawing her family found at James MacDonald's antique store in Depot Town. The 7-foot piece of history can be seen in the City Planner's office at City Hall.

Left & right: Frederick Law Olmsted at both ends of his illustrious career of planning America's nineteenth century landscape

The Olmsted Brothers proposed improvements for Ypsilanti

-James Mann

The landscape architecture firm of Olmsted Brothers sent representatives to Ypsilanti in 1913 to prepare a report for proposed improvements that would form the basis for a general city plan. The founder of the firm, Frederick Law Olmsted who had planned Central Park in New York, did not personally come to Ypsilanti, but his presence would have been noted if he had—he had died a few years before.

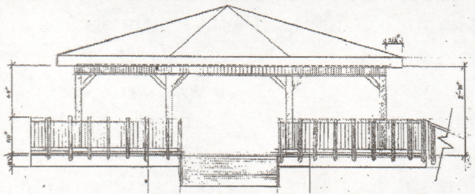
The report, dated December 31, 1913, concerned possible improvements in the roads, trees, parks and playgrounds of the city, as well as suggestions for dealing what the compilers saw as the problems of the city. The report suggested the city acquire the land on the banks of the Huron River for use as a park system. It noted the benefits to the public the use of Frog Island and what is now Riverside Park would have.

A system of parks, the report suggested, should run along the river from the northern limit of the city to the southern limit. This would allow the public to enjoy the natural beauty of the Huron River that was in little need of improvement. "The river with its many advantages as a naturally beautiful feature of the city is now almost wholly ignored, or worse, it is defiled and treated as a menace to adjacent property."

The report referred to the Water Tower as an imposing shaft of stone, but "surmounted by an ill-proportioned wooden dome." The report further noted that the Water Tower was a subject "worthy of careful study by an architect of the best artistic judgment."

The report was submitted, studied, and tossed onto a shelf where it was in time forgotten. A few of the suggestions came to be, but not because of the Olmsted Brothers' report.

[Exceprts of the report featured throughout this issue]



A gazebo in the Park

Construction of an octagonal gazebo atop the dock in Riverside Park is expected to begin this month. Made possible by the Depot Town Community Development Corporation, CDC credits others for their contribution to this effort, including the City of Ypsilanti (materials) and Washtenaw Community College (construction). This project uses the final funds provided for in a State grant begun last winter for park improvements which included 24 new street lights in Riverside Park.

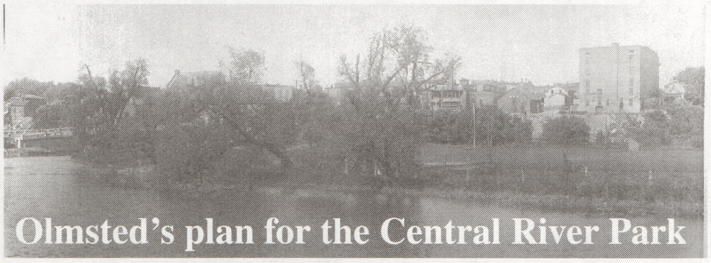
New family portraiture changes the landscape

Mary Potts' collage portraits involve the viewer in a whole new dimension

Potts Studio is a boutique that specializes in capturing family portraits in a way that is natural and unposed. Large collage portraits are hand assembled from hundreds of photographs making them completely one-of-a-kind.

Depot Town residents Mary Potts and her husband Tim Pulice say, "We are very excited to be a new fixture on the neighborhood scene. Many of our coming studio projects will coincide with Depot Town events to add to the district's traditional mix of activities for families."

Stop by their new studio at 25 East Cross and welcome them this month. There may even be time to meet holiday deadlines.



Olmsted's plan for the Central River Park

West bank of the Huron River is now Riverside Park. Note the five-story Masonic Temple at right. Today it's the three-story Riverside Arts Center

"In the very center of the City of Ypsilanti lies the most attractive site for a public park and yet this site is at present unrecognized and entirely undeveloped. The large tract of low land very near the water level along the west bank of the river between Congress Street and East Cross Street now has but little commercial value and is almost unoccupied. It should be acquired by the City while it is still available.

"The low land should be protected from floods by a levee and all land so protected should be drained by a pipe extending to a point below the Congress Street dam….

"Trees and shrubs can be grown along the borders of this meadow, but the large central area should be kept free for the most part from trees and decorative planting or other improvements to make an attractive open unit that can be used in summer as a playfield and flooded in winter for skating."

Riverside Park

Our connection to the central business district

Ypsilanti's version of New York City's Central Park has a long and distinguished history. This riverside meadow was a Native American meeting place for hundreds of years and, in 1809, became the site of Godfroy's Trading Post. With the development of mills taking advantage of the Huron River's constantly moving energy, the mill owners built their elegant mansions along the banks with backyards and formal gardens cascading down to the river.

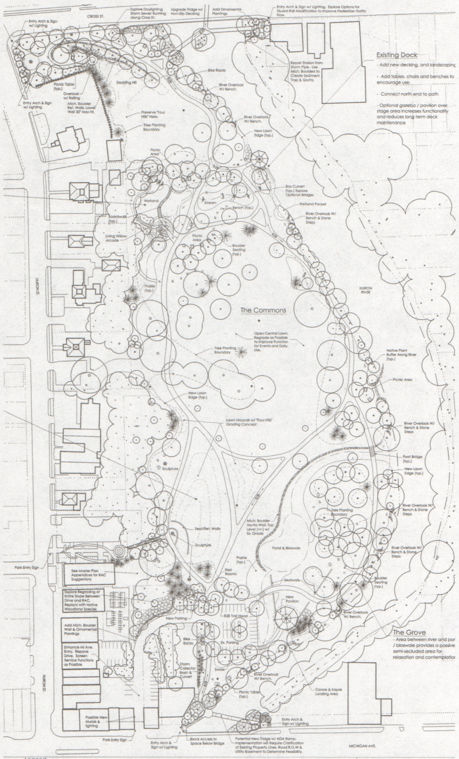
The City later developed those garden properties as Riverside Park and City Hall stood at the top of the hill at Huron and Cross.

In the 1960s, local entrepreneurs had hopes for a Greek Theatre to be connected by a pedestrian bridge making an entry by a proposed pedestrian bridge from River Street.

After the seventy-four-year-old Cross Street Bridge was replaced in 1984, a wooden three-way pedestrian "tridge" was installed at a lower level to connect Riverside Park to Depot Town and Frog Island Park.

Today, Riverside Park is the center of neighborhood activity with festivals, expositions, concerts, and picnics bringing the community together in a tradition and style that would meet the approval of the visionary landscape architects from Olmsted's firm.

A new plan for Riverside Park


Cross St.
Entry Arch & Sign w/ Lighting
Explore Daylighting Storm Sewer Running along Cross St.
Upgrade Tridge w/ Non-Slip Decking
Add Ornamental Plantings
Entry Arch & Sign w/ Lighting. Explore Options for Guard Rail Modification to Improve Pedestrian Traffic Flow
Existing Dock
- Add new decking, and landscaping
- Add tables, chairs and benches to encourage use.
- Connect north end to path
- Optional gazebo / pavilion over stage area increases functionality and reduces long term deck maintenance
Repair Erosion from Storm Pipe. Use Mich. Boulders to Create Sediment Trap & Grotto
Bike Racks
River Overlook W/ Bench.
Sledding Hill
Picnic Table (typ.)
Overlook w/ Railing
Mich. Boulder Ret. Walls. Lower Wall 30" Max Ht.
Entry Arch & Sign w/ Lighting
Preserve "Four Hills" Here.
Tree Planting Boundary
New Lawn Edge (typ.)
Picnic Area
Box Culvert (typ.) Explore Optional Bridges
Wetland Pocket
Wetland
Stream
Bench (typ.)
River Overlook W/ Bench & Stone Steps
Boardwalk (typ.)
Living Willow Arcade
Boulder Seating (typ.)
Prairie (typ.)
Huron St.
Huron River
The Commons
Open Central Lawn. Regrade as Possible to Improve Function for Events and Daily Use.
Native Plant Buffer Along River (typ.)
Lawn Mounds w/ "Four-Hills" Grading Concept
Foot Bridge (typ.)
Sculpture
Mich. Boulder Ha-Ha Wall. Top Level (+/-) w/ Ex. Grade
Seat/Ret. Walls
Pond & Bioswale
Park Entry Sign
See Master Plan Appendices for RAC Suggestions
Rest Rooms
Seatwalls
New Pavilion
Explore Regrading of Entire Slope Between Drive and RAC. Replant with Native Woodland Species
New Parking
B2B Trail Head
Add Mich. Boulder Wall & Ornamental Plantings
Bike Racks
Ex. Parking
The Grove
- Area between river and pond / bioswale provides a passive semi-secluded area for relaxation and contemplation
Enhance Mi Ave. Entry. Repave Drive. Screen Service Functions as Possible
Storm Collector Basin & Culvert
Canoe & Kayak Landing Area
Possible New Murals & Lighting
Block Access to Space Below Bridge
Potential New Tridge w/ ADA Ramp. Implementation will Require Clarification of Existing Property Lines, Road R.O.W. & Utility Easement to Determine Feasibility.
Michigan Ave.

Many updates are scheduled for the 2009 version of Ypsilanti's cherished Riverside Park. After several sessions with input and ideas from the community at large, the above plan has evolved. Rehabbing the dock and replacing the pavilion will begin in the spring.
A large and colorful version of this plan is on exhibit at City Hall.

Creative window themes are recognized again

Toys & Trains is the theme for shop windows in Depot Town for the coming holiday season. Join the judges for a neighborhood walk-around at 8 p.m. Sunday, 30 November. Unique displays on the local theme will create new categories for recognition. Lighted front windows show our hospitality even when it's after regular shopping hours.

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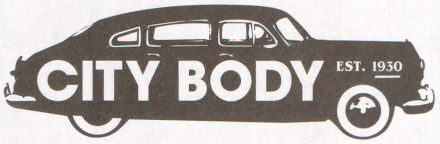
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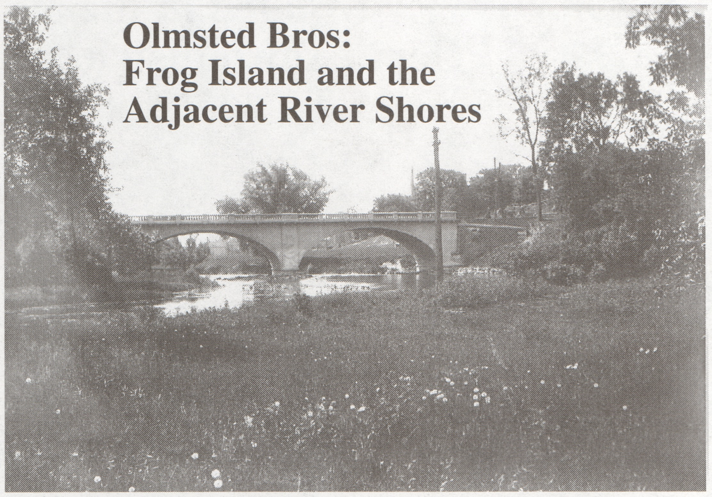
Olmsted Bros: Frog Island and the Adjacent River Shores



Looking south from Frog Island, the sluiceway still ran to the Cross Street Bridge in 1913. This concrete bridge was replaced in 1984.

"Frog Island and the adjacent shores of the river between Cross Street and Forest Avenue are now very attractive, and are well adapted for park purposes, although of little value otherwise. The east shore should be acquired as far as the fence along the railway yards; on the west shore a strip of land should be acquired of sufficient width for a path bordered by trees.

"With a modest amount of grading Frog Island could be made into an excellent playground. A swimming pool can be constructed to fill from the sluice above the Deubel Mill and to empty into the river below by means of gravity flow. (It is to be noted that a similar site for a swimming pool, and possibly a better one in some respects, is to be found on the Barnard Meadows just north of the Water Works dam.)"

The River and Its Shores

"The Huron River, with its large natural reservoirs and its steep channel, was long ago claimed for economic uses, by water power development in a small unsystematic way. Many mills were built; but most of them have since fallen into disuse and decay, and the river is now largely in a picturesque state of neglect. Its shores are now overgrown in many places, pools and rapids break its monotony, while railways and public roads cross and recross it in many places."

Frog Island Park

Depot Town's backyard and playground

"A mill dam on the Huron was built by Hardy and Reading as early as 1827, at a point between the present Cross and Forest Avenue Bridge. The power was used to run a sawmill. This dam was a rough log structure and was swept away by the flood water of 1832. In 1828 Hardy and Reading erected a flour mill just south of their previous location, which stood until 1851."

–Harvey C. Colburn, The Story of Ypsilanti, 1923

As the mills north of Cross Street developed, a sluice was dug along the River to power the wheel. The space proscribed by the sluice around the east side of the mill gave the appearance of an island and the name stuck.

There has been at least one kid in every generation who claims to have given the "island" its "Frog" appellation and no one in the neighborhood wants to diminish that honor through contradiction.

Although the Michigan Central Railroad filled the mill's sluice with scrap concrete in later years, water still seeps through the gate at the south end where it returns to the river beneath the concrete pedestrian bridge.

This bridge connected Ypsilanti High School (Cross Street Village) with its athletic field for many years. When the school district gave the football field to the City, the field and track were maintained and an outdoor amphitheater was developed at the south end. A community garden has been developed at the north end.

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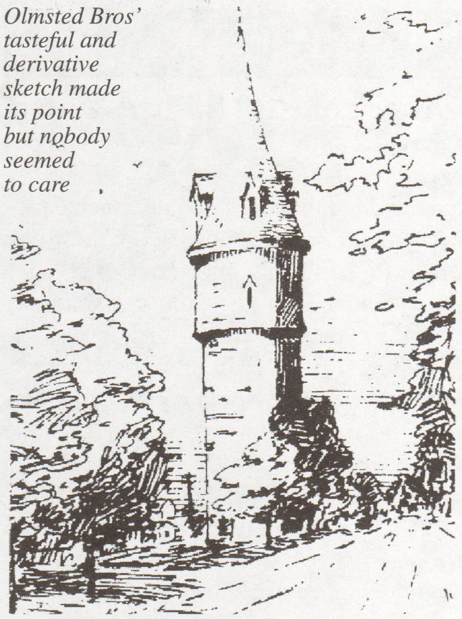
Tower design brings Ypsi both scorn and fame



Olmsted Bros' tasteful and derivative sketch made its point but nobody seemed to care

The Water Tower

"The water tower in Ypsilanti is an imposing shaft of stone but is now surmounted by an ill-proportioned wooden dome. It would be somewhat difficult to make this a well-proportioned feature, as at best the column must be too short for so tall a top structure; but it would be possible, by removing the extra platform beneath the drum, by corbelling out under the drum, and by altering the form of the roof, to make a much more agreeable object of this prominent and dominating structure. The accompanying sketch suggests one possible treatment, but is intended as a suggestion only, for this is a matter worthy of careful study by an architect of the best artistic judgment."

Wins world-wide contest [for whatever that's worth]

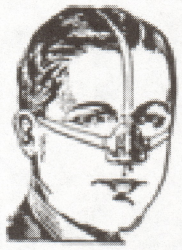
-Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The World's Most Phallic Building contest was held in 2003 by *Cabinet* magazine to find the building which most resembled a human phallus. The contest originated when writer Jonathan Ames drew the ire of *Slate* readers by claiming, in a diary later published in his book *I Love You More Than You Know*, that the Williamsburg Bank Building in Brooklyn, New York, was the world's most phallic, leading *Cabinet* magazine to initiate a search of its own to find which building was truly the "world's most phallic." Cities and readers subsequently poured in their views and staked their claims to the magazine's editors.

After months of entries and discussion, the Ypsilanti Water Tower was announced as the winner, although the winner of a readers' poll was the Florida State Capitol building in Tallahassee. Another notable nominee was the Torre Agbar (Agbar Tower) in Barcelona.

Cabinet magazine noted that the Ypsilanti Water Tower, called "the brick dick" by locals, "is clearly the world's most phallic. "The tower was designed by William R. Coats and constructed as part of an elaborate city waterworks project that began in 1899. Located on the highest point in Ypsilanti, the tower was finally erected in 1890. It had cost $21,435.63 to build. Made of Joliet limestone, the tower is 147 feet tall, has an 85 foot base and holds 250,000 gallons. Hoping to protect themselves from injury, the builders made at least four crosses in the stonework, one over the west door, an elaborate but difficult to find Greek Cross on the east side and two inside the water tower.

In the next *Rag*:



Look at the terrible things they've been saying about our Ypsilanti! Get ready for an exposé of shock and schlock equal to the political tone of the season.

Dedicated:

To those who planted the seeds of community spirit
And to those who kept it watered
And to those who keep it growing.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
A monthly publication of
the Depot Town Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 970235
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
To the editor:
thomasdodd@comcast.net

The Depot Town Association, Inc.
Gary McKeever, President
Merrill Guerra, Vice President
Andy French, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org

DTA meets
6:30 p.m, Wednesday, 15 October,
Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

www.depottown.org

Ypsilanti Historical Society
Museum and Archives
(free admission)
Hours: 2:00 to 5:00pm
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220 North Huron Street
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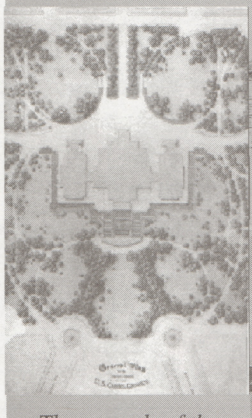
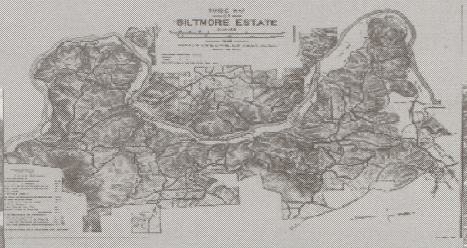
Holiday shop window theme: Toys & Trains
(see flyer and November issue)

Other jobs by the noted Olmsted landscape firm

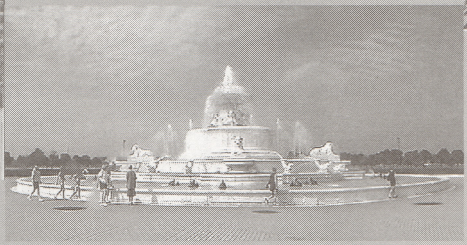


The grounds of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.



Grounds for Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate. Is it too late to change the plan for Water Street?

Some think NYC's Central Park looks a lot like Ypsi's Riverside Park



Scott Fountain on Detroit's Belle Isle

After Olmsted's death in 1903, his sons John and Fred, Jr. continued the work of the firm, bringing their talents to Ypsilanti in 1913. Despite our rejection of their expertise, the firm remained in business until 1950.

EXCERPTS FROM

Ypsilanti, Michigan

Report upon proposed improvements, forming a basis for a General City Plan

OLMSTED BROTHERS

Landscape Architects

Brookline, Mass.

December 31, 1913

From the Introduction:

"…If Ypsilanti is to attract further business and industries, the advantages of easy access, cheap power, good water, good buildings sites, and agreeable homes for labor must be made evident, and must be made and keep superior to those of other communities in the vast territory in which Ypsilanti is but one of the many small centers."

Steam Railroads and Industrial Districts

"…The worst grade crossings are those at "River and Cross Streets near the station and at Forest Street, and the most obvious solution is the raising of the railroad tracks."

River Street

"River Street, the main approach from the northeast, is now 100 feet wide south of Forest Avenue; it should be widened north of Forest Avenue as far as the proposed cemetery entrance; and farther north building lines should be established. "

East Cross Street

"East Cross Street, another approach from the east, is void of street trees near the railway station and between the station and the river. There is no good reason why street trees should not be planted there. Tree pits should be prepared...."

He loved his work

"What artist so noble...as he who, with far-reaching conception of beauty, in designing power, sketches the outlines, writes the colors, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations, before the work he arranged for her shall realize his intentions."

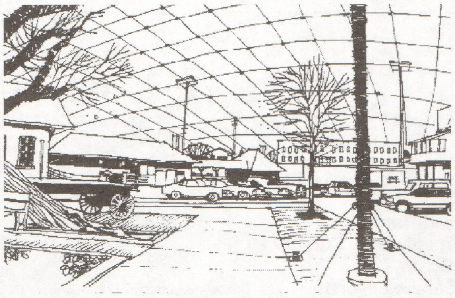
-Frederick Law Olmsted

So much for the advice of experts

Other colossal failures noted

Overlooking the advice of world-famous experts is nothing new here. We have a long and proud record of questionable promotions for the good of the city; the Water Street Project is not our first. Our creative motto might well be "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained."

- An early entrepreneur in the neighborhood, Warren Lewis, ran an **off-track betting** parlor at 54 E. Cross in 1904/5 drawing a daily rail car of "swells" from Detroit until "bluenoses" shut them down.
- **Parking meters** were removed in 1976 for new sidewalks and were hidden to prevent their reinstallation.
- Old photos of the block convinced preservationists **angle parking** would be quaint and historically accurate, but City Hall said it was "illegal on a State trunk line." Other towns claim exemption from this rule.
- DTA's 1980s **Boomer Days** promotions recalled bums, tramps, and hoboes in the railroad district, but camping out in a fake "hobo jungle" wasn't politically correct with homelessness on the rise.
- A City employee tested the strength of the Romanesque **Cross Street Bridge** with so many test holes that they compromised the structure and it had to be replaced.
- At least five different plans promoted the development of **upscale dining** in the abandoned MCRR depot.
- 1970's promoters saw a potential site for a **Radisson hotel** next to the Cross Street Bridge, but it went to Ypsilanti Township and became the "Marriott near Ann Arbor."
- In 1990 "Depot Town II" proposed 15 reconditioned railcars strung out as a **mini-mall** near the Old Caboose and Freighthouse to merchandise toy trains, whistles, scented soaps, and maybe even historic Michigan lighthouse nightlights.



The September 1989 Rag *featured a dome over the district with giant 'doggie doors' for trains to pass through, but it was either too soon or too late for* The Rag's *April Fools' theme*

Trees not seen here since the 1913 report:

American Elm

American Chestnut
Hackberry
Douglas Hawthorn
Black Crownberry
Black Cottonwood

American Elm
Oak Wilt
Red Oaks
Eastern Hemlock
Beech
Aster
Murray Birch

White Ash

From the Olmsted Report:

"…If all the street trees of Ypsilanti were to be wiped out of existence it would unquestionably be a very great loss to the community, a loss that would be reflected in a substantial shrinkage of land values. Lots sell better on a street that is made attractive by trees at their best, as compared with similar lots on a bare street or one with a few small sickly specimens.

"…Street trees have already been driven from Congress Street (Michigan Avenue) and Huron Street near their junctions and from Cross Street and River Street near the railway station. These streets represent the beginning of a treeless business district, such as is all too common in our cities but entirely unnecessary in the case of Ypsilanti."

RAGTIME Coming events

4 October
ANTIQUE TRUCK SHOW
Riverside Park

24 October
HALLOWEEN FALL FESTIVAL
Downtown

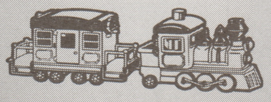
Ypsilanti Youth Theatre presents
East of the Sun and West of the Moon

Friday & Saturday, November 14 & 15 • 7 p.m.
Saturday & Sunday, November 15 & 16 • 2 p.m.

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
120 N. Huron, Ypsilanti

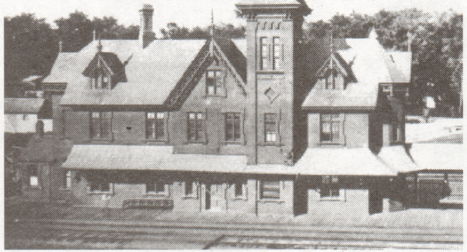
www.ypsiyouththeatre.org

6 & 7 December
HERITAGE HOLIDAY HOME TOUR



TOYS & TRAINS
is the theme for this year's
Holiday Window Decor
Judging 8 p.m. Sunday, 30 November
Fame, fortune, and schlocky prizes for all!

"Evil" noted in the Depot Town district


-from the Ypsilanti Historical Archives
The Michigan Central Railroad Depot at Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1895

Railway Station and Yards

"The somewhat remarkable efforts of the Michigan Central to make the station grounds attractive should encourage the City to cooperate with and supplement these efforts, not only by preserving and improving the outlook over the river, but by securing more radical and essential improvements in connection with the station itself. In the first place, the present grade crossings of the tracks at Cross Street and in a less degree at Forest Avenue are serious evils for the elimination of which the City and the railroad should adopt definite plans at once in order that no further obstacles may be placed in the way of improvement, even though such plans cannot be carried out for many years. If the station were to be moved to the westerly side of the tracks, whence most of the business comes, the evil of the Cross Street grade crossing could be materially reduced, as a large share of the travel across the tracks would be eliminated."

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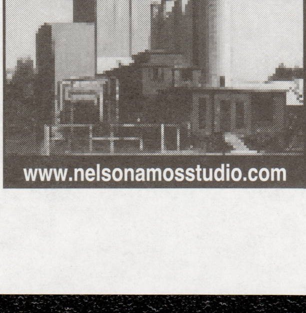

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